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ABSTRACT

An overview of the research findings on the effects of television on children provides the rationale for several research and policy proposals for improving television programing for children. Findings about television's influence have implications for communication policymakers in two areas: (1) the availability of children's programing; and (2) the need for more diversity in television content. To provide more children's television programing, the federal government can effect policy either through regulations of the amount of programing required or through the stimulation of production of series for children. Also, the television industry could cooperate by rotating the broadcast of children's shows during the times that children watch. In addition, diversity of content of television programs can be achieved by having diversity in values, interests, ideas, and backgrounds among television decisionmakers and production staff. More policy relevant research and increased collaboration between researchers and production staff would also be beneficial. (HAB)

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Television's Impact on Children:

Roles for Research and Policy*

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Television is an important part of the life of American children. By the time that an American child has graduated from high school, he or she will have spent more time watching television than was spent in any other waking activity, including going to school (Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973). Since television is a constant companion as a child develops and since this presence is influential it is an important socializer of children.

While there are programs designed specifically for children, most of what they watch is adult programming. Analyses of entertainment programming--whether of Saturday morning children's programming or of daytime programming or of evening prime time programming--indicate that television presents a particular view of the social system. In addition to the heavy dose of violence as the primary strategy for the resolution of interpersonal conflict (Gerbner, 1972), portrayals of various groups are very limited. White males predominate with minority groups and women being underrepresented (Barcus, 1971, 1972; Gerbner, 1969, 1972; Mendelson and Young, 1972; Ormiston and Williams, 1973; Sternglanz and Serbin, 1974; Tedesco, 1974). Moreover the portrayals of these groups are very stereotyped. Minority groups are likely to be

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cast as entertainers, law enforcement officers, or objects of humor (Clark, 1972; Roberts, 1970). Women, on the other hand, are more likely to be portrayed as being unemployed if they are married and in low status jobs when they do have an occupation (Busby, 1975; Sternglanz and Serbin, 1974; Tedesco, 1974). Further, both women and minorities are less likely to have major roles, are more likely to have little authority over others, are less likely to be competent and successful and are more likely to be victims of violence (Busby, 1975; Gerbner, 1972; Gerbner and Gross, 1973; Mendelson and Young, 1972; Ormiston and Williams, 1973; Sternglanz and Serbin, 1974; Tedesco, 1974).

There would be no reason to be concerned about the constricted social world of television if children discounted it or were unaffected by it. However, research on the effects of this content demonstrates the medium's influence. There is evidence that television content can affect both aggressive and positively-valued behaviors in children (Leifer, Gordon, and Graves, 1973; Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973). Since this subject has received much attention and since there are excellent summaries of the work in this area (c.f., Goranson, 1970; Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973; Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972). Rather I will focus on television's ability to influence children's perceptions and attitudes.

Television content influences children's perceptions of the social realm. In a study of children's views of social reality (Gerbner and Gross, 1973), children who were heavy viewers had the following misconceptions:

1. They overestimated the percentage of the world's population that is American.
2. They overestimated the percentage of white and non-white Americans employed in professional and managerial sector.
3. They overestimated the percentage of the population who are professional atheletes, entertainers, artists or law enforcement officers.
4. They overestimated the likelihood that they will be victims of crimes commited by strangers.

These misconceptions are consistent with the view of the world that television presents (Gerbner and Gross, 1973).

In work which my colleagues and I are now conducting, we have found further evidence for television's ability to influence children and adolescents views of life. This influence reflects children's evaluation of television as very believable. For example, one adolescent boy told us that the news and "The Rookies" were both true-to-life, but he found "The Rookies" more exciting because their encounters were shown right as they were happening while the encounters shown on the news had already happened.

In addition children's attitudes are affected by television. It has been shown to affect children's attitudes toward school (Bogatz and Ball, 1971), toward patriotism (Alper and Leidy, 1970), toward racial and ethnic groups (Bogatz and Ball, 1971; Graves, 1975; Leifer, Graves, and Phelps, 1976), toward foreign people (Roberts et al, 1974), and toward males and females (Frueh and McGhee, 1975; Leifer, Graves, and Phelps, 1976).

In research that I have conducted on the impact of cartoons on racial attitudes both positive and negative portrayals of blacks in cartoons altered the attitudes of black and white children (Graves, 1975). [illegible] white children exposure to negative portrayals of blacks produced large negative attitude change while exposure to positive portrayals resulted in smaller though positive attitude change. Black children, on the other hand, responded to both positive and negative portrayals of black cartoon characters with positive attitude change. It seemed that for the black children mere inclusion of blacks had a salutory affect on attitudes.

Thus, available research indicates that content on television is stereotyped and that it can influence children's attitudes, perceptions and behaviors. While there is evidence of television's impact, it is by no means the sole cause of attitudes and perceptions in children. Television's influence is increased when it provides children with experiences with people and situations which are unfamiliar to them. The impact of the medium could be moderated if parents took a more active role of either limiting their children's viewing to those programs that were both desirable and appropriate or of helping children to understand and evaluate more critically the varied content that they see. Research in the Boston area with about 150 black, white and Latino children between the ages of five and 16 indicates that parents neither limit viewing nor discuss with their children the meaning of the content they see (Leifer, Graves, and Phelps, 1976). Efforts should be directed both toward informing parents of

television's impact and toward encouraging them to take a more active interest in their children's television viewing activities.

Findings about television's influence have implications for communications policy-makers in at least two areas: the availability of children's programming and the need for more diversity in television content. The strong legal tradition within our society to protect the rights and interests of children strengthens the case for the need for policy level changes. In spite of the fact that children are an important, yet different, part of the public and in spite of the fact that children's programming as one of the 14 categories of content that a station must broadcast, desirable programming for children is limited (Leifer, Gordon, and Graves, 1974).

Let us explore the reasons behind the failure to meet children's television needs. Even when programs are designed for children they generally are produced by people who have both limited experience with children (Melody, 1973) and who lack formal training in child development (Stevenson, 1972). Thus, they are generally unaware of or unresponsive to the peculiar psychological attributes of child viewers. Children process information from television and other sources differently from adults. Young children are not likely to remember (Holaday and Stoddard, 1933) or even like the same elements that adults will (Becker and Wolfe, 1960). Neither are they able to isolate the relevant parts of a program (Collins, 1970; Hale, Miller, and Stevenson, 1968; Hawkins, 1973). They are not able to associate consistently motivations for

and consequences of behaviors, particularly violent ones (Collins, 1978; Leifer and Roberts, 1972; Leifer et al, 1971). Further, children are more susceptible to persuasion than are adults (Abelson and Lesser, 1959). Failure to take into consideration these special psychological characteristics results in programming that is not relevant to the developmental needs of children. From my own program research experience, television content can convey very complex concepts to children when their cognitive capacities were carefully considered. For example, in a new children's series, Vegetable Soup, which is designed to create more positive racial attitudes, there is a segment which explains to children why different groups of people have different hair. In portraying how the shape of one's hair is affected by the shape of follicles, cake decorators squeezed out play dough to illustrate this fact. In this way, complex scientific information was explained using familiar objects. Children were able to learn an important fact and were better entertained because of their increased comprehension.

In an effort to address the need for more children's programming there are at least two groups to stimulate more activity in this area. One would be the federal government, either through regulations about the amount of programming required or through the stimulation or production of series for children. In view of First Amendment dangers, I feel that the federal government as a stimulator of innovative programming is a more desirable role. For example, through the Emergency School Assistance Act the government is responsible for a number of new children's series,

like Carrascolendas, Vegetable Soup, Villa Allegre and Infinity Factory. This action has both increased the amount of children's programming and provided models of innovative programming for the commercial stations to emulate.

The other group to increase children's programming would be the television industry. While recognizing the economic constraints and the need for large audiences the three networks could cooperate and increase children's programs by rotation of the broadcasting of these shows during the times that children watch. This strategy would be similar to the way in which the networks covered the Watergate hearings in 1974. For example, during the first half of prime time, ABC might program for children on Monday, NBC on Tuesday, CBS on Wednesday, etc. In this way programming for children could be increased without any one network bearing the entire economic burden.

The second general area of policy that needs to be addressed is the diversity of content on television. Television should present the diversity of what we are and what we can be as Americans to help children prepare for the world in which they live. By diversity in content I mean that television should show different styles of interpersonal interpersonal interaction, human activity, and the full range of psychological characteristics and personality traits of all age, sex, race, ethnic, and economic groups.

Within the sphere of children's programming and entertainment programming in general diversity in content could be encouraged, at least in part, by maximizing access of different groups to the medium. Attaining diversity in values, interests, ideas, and

backgrounds among decision makers and production staff could ideally be effected through industry initiatives and self-regulation. This need can also be addressed through affirmative action plans which will increase the number of women and minority groups who continue to be missing from policy-making levels of the industry. While mere inclusion does not assure a desirable change in the content toward more diversity, there is evidence from government funded children's programming that a broader range of input in terms of inclusion of minorities and women has resulted in more diverse television content.

In addtion to the recommendations previously made, there is a need for more policy relevant research and for utilization of the results of existing academic research. One way to stimulate policy-relevant research would be for more cooperation and collaboration between policy makers and academic researchers. In particular, there is a need especially from the industry, to indicate just what questions need answering. Another option would be to establish some mechanism by which existing academic research could be made available to policy makers in a usable form. A television research clearinghouse or information office might be such a mechanism.

Finally, there is a need for increased collaboration between researchers and production people to create better programming for children. While the cooperation of these two groups with their different disciplines and values can be a challenging effort, the product that results can be one that provides each constituency with a sense of pride and achievement.

The society must take more seriously the actual and potential influence of television. People who understand children must be more involved in the development of programming. The industry should recognize its responsibility and address issues of amount and quality of programming for children. Finally, parents must acknowledge their role and become more involved with their children and television. Otherwise we as adults may fail to utilize an opportunity to provide children with experiences that will make them better able to live and work together in a diverse and challenging world.

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